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ABSTRACT

This document begins by noting that during the first half of this century, the relationship of mothers and daughters existed under a cloud of suspicion, and that only recently has this relationship been deemed worthy of reflection and study. It surveys the research and theoretical literature on the mother-daughter relationship, delineates the crucial nature of this relationship as it pertains to female development, and highlights aspects of this relationship meriting further study. It recognizes that the concentration on the extremes of the life span--the daughter in childhood, the mother in old age--has tended to distort views of the mother-daughter relationship during the adult years. The most significant findings reported are that for the overwhelming majority of women, mothers impact significantly and positively on their daughters' lives. It is suggested that the mother-daughter relationship begins as a close and supportive one and that, despite the male, androcentric insistence on separation and the viscissitudes of adolescence, ends up being such that mothers and their adult daughters often view each other as best friends and significant sources of mutual esteem and support. It is concluded that mother-daughter relationships remain an unbroken cycle of connectedness and caring in female development. (Author/NB)

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Abstract

Mothers and Daughters/Daughters and Mothers; An Unbroken Cycle in Female Development*

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During the first half of this century, the relationship of mothers and daughters has been under a cloud of suspicion. In fact, it is only recently that this relationship has been deemed worthy of reflection and study. In this paper, the research and theoretical literature on the mother-daughter relationship is surveyed; the crucial nature of this relationship as it pertains to female development is delineated; and aspects of this relationship meriting further study are highlighted. The concentration on the extremes of the life span - the daughter in childhood, the mother in old age - has tended to distort our views of the mother-daughter relationship during the adult years. Thus, the most significant findings to be reported are that for the overwhelming majority of women, mothers impact significantly and positively on their daughters' lives. That is, the mother-daughter relationship begins as a close and supportive one and despite the male, androcentric insistence on separation, and the viscissitudes of adolescence, ends up being such that mothers and their adult daughters often view each other as best friends and significant sources of mutual esteem and support. Mother-daughter relationships remain an unbroken cycle of connectedness and caring in female development.

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*Paper presented at the Conference of the International Council of Psychologists (ICP), Singapore, August 24, 1988; and the International Congress of Psychology, Sydney, Australia, September 1, 1988.

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Mothers and Daughters/Daughters and Mothers: An Unbroken Cycle in Female Development*

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You may not have a daughter,
but you are one
You may not be a mother
but you have one.

Introduction

During the first half of this twentieth century, the relationship of mothers and daughters has been under a cloud of suspicion. Earlier in this century men had been in charge of describing women and their important relationships, including their lives as women and mothers. Only more recently have feminist clinicians, researchers and scholars been looking at women as daughters and mothers and been noting the discrepancy between how women are instructed to behave (and believed to behave) by husbands, family members and society; as compared to how they wish to behave and actually do behave - i.e., the reality of woman - defined roles

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as daughters and mothers.

As feminists advocate and as more women take responsibility for their own lives, they realize how important the mother-daughter relationship is to them - both as mothers of daughters and as daughters of mothers across the life span. In this paper the nature of the mother-daughter and daughter-mother relationship in differing, developmental stages, as detailed in current psychological conceptualization and research, will be surveyed. The crucial nature of this relationship, as it pertains to female development, will be examined with implications for psychological helpers, researchers and women themselves being spelled out.

Past Psychological Treatment of the Mother-Daughter Relationship

Male derived conceptualizations of the rightful nature of women, their relationships and roles has tended to predominate Western society's thinking for much of this century. And to a large extent our present psychological sense of the nature of mother-daughter relationship has been shaped largely by Freud and his followers. Freud, in turn was a product of the patriarchal views of his day, wherein women were expected to adapt themselves to the needs of men and where women's relationships with each other, including the mother and daughter bond, were strongly devalued. Freud theoreized that a daughter of four or five transferred her attachment from her mother to her father, more or less ending the strong mother and daughter connectedness.

Freud's insistence on the desirability of breaking the mother-daughter bond fits contemporary male androcentric formulations of health personality development; as well as the U.S. trend toward geographic and social mobility- Pre-industrial societies were marked

by extended families; whereas industrialized economies, such as that of the U.S., have been characterized by nuclear families, in which inter-generational attachments have been viewed as impediments to job mobility and success. Hence, stressing separateness spoke to a national orientation and economic self betterment.

Freud's followers and most of the mental health professionals of his day embraced and further elaborated upon this orientation toward separateness, rather than connectedness between mothers and daughters. Helene Deutch (1945), a Freudian analyst who wrote on the psychology of women, termed a mother's desire to hold onto her daughter as the "tragedy of motherhood". The Freudian understanding of human behavior, as noted by Low (1984) "precluded the possibility that a woman could continue her attachment to her mother and at the same time develop into a heterosexual adult woman, able to love a man"(p. 1). Heterosexuality for women in this school of thought needed to be purchased at the price of severing female to female connectedness and intimacy, including that of mother and daughter. Women were seen as needing to center themselves in relation to a man - i.e., their fathers, lovers, husbands, male employers, etc. And the female child in this viewpoint was seen as needing to break this mothering-tie and the mother as needing to sacrifice a close relationship in the best interest of her daughter. Mothers were also instructed to both be devoted and steadfast in their roles as a mother; and yet to gracefully and appropriately allow their children to separate and grow away from them. These contrasting and conflicting expectations seem to be particularly poignant as played out in the mother-daughter relationships.

Furthermore, male dominated psychological conceptualizations of acceptable adult development have complicated matters for mother and daughter relationships with its rejection of adult parent and child closeness; whereas women have demonstrated a continuing need for intergenerational relatedness which has been decried as regressive and dysfunctional. The supposed typical mother-daughter adolescent conflicts have been misunderstood as enduring and over-accented as signalling the needed end of this deeply rooted relationship.

Contemporary and Feminist Veiws on the Mother-Daughter Relationship: Connectedness and Separation, Intimacy and Autonomy

As noted previously, Frued and his followers did not see attachment and connection to others as a source of human motivation, independent of psychosexual development, as have some others (i.e., object relations theorists - Bowlby, 1969; Fairbairn, 1952; Koht, 1971; Winnicott, 1962; and feminist clinicians and scholars - Belenky, 1986; Gilligan, 1977, 1982; Miller, 1976; Nickerson, 1985.

This issue of attachment, connectedness and intimacy versus autonomy and separatedness are central concepts in feminist-oriented, developmental thinking, understanding and research into women's lives. The emphasis on the value of separateness has been more chatacteristic of how men relate and is reflective of the male androcentric version of how human develop. Whereas, as Low (1984) notes, "the glue of attachment that bonds mother and daughter is found in the human need to be connected with others" (p. 2). Gilligan (1982) for example, has demonstrated that men and women tend to develop different ways of relating to others and use different frames of reference to resolve conflicts. Women, Gilligan found, were more likely to base moral decisions on consideration as to the effects these decisions would

have on their relationships; and men on abstract principles of justice.

Why Women Mother. The differences in women's ways of attaching and relating have their origins, according to Chodorow (1978) in the different ways in which women mother. Chodorow rejects biological (mothering instinct) and role socialization (role training) arguments as to why women mother (i.e., the reproduction of mothering). Rather, Chodorow maintains that women's mothering reproduces itself through differing psychic outcomes in women and men. As a result of having been parented by a woman, she goes on to say, women are more likely than men to see themselves as mothers - that is "to relocate themselves in a primary mother-child relationship, to get gratification from the mothering relationship and to develop psychological and relational capacities for mothering" (p. 206). "Women" Chodorow observes, "mother daughters - who when they become adults, mother in turn" (p. 209). Whereas, Chodorow claims, that a mother raises a son to be autonomous and independent of her, encouraging him to separate and join the larger world. Her daughter on the other hand is raised to be involved in an ongoing relationship with her and to be sensitive to the needs of others. This theme of connectedness and continuity of relatedness we shall note as recurring themes in female development as we highlight some aspects of the mother-daughter relationship across the life span (in a Western societal framework - i.e., the United States).

The Mother-Daughter Relationship: Developmental Stages

Childhood and Adolescence. As Caplan (1986) points out, "when kids have problems, professionals too often say it's mom's fault, and we believe them, but the real picture is far more complex" (p. 70). She continues, "blaming mothers for their children's psychological problems has a long history, particularly among mental health professionals" (p. 70). She points to some Freudian conceptualizing we have noted previously (i.e., the need for mothers to be selfless and let their daughters break their bonds) as well as Freudian concepts of the "overprotective mother" at one extreme and "maternal deprivation" at the other.

Caplan (1986) reviews 125 articles, in which mothers are blamed for a wide range of problems - namely, 72 different kinds of psychological disorders, ranging from agorophia to arson, hyperactivity to schizophrenia, premature mourning to homicidal transsexualism - this despite the fact that researchers have paid little attention to the psychology of motherhood (1987). The collective portrait of pathogenic mothering (particularly of daughters, because of the postulated 'modelling effect') is not only "scientifically implausible but also socially destructive" (Caplan, 1986, p. 70).

As Field and Widmay (1982) point out, developmental psychologists have studied motherhood largely in the context of its effects on the children. "We rarely ask the mother how motherhood feels, how it affects her life and personality and just what motherhood means" (p. 685). Moreover, social scientists seem least interested in the mother of the adolescent, although her struggles are universally accepted as extraordinarily difficult.

Using the model of connectedness, which is asserted to charact-

erize the unbroken nature of mother-daughter development, plausible clinical evidence suggests that the experiences of mothers and daughters shape each other's development throughout the life span. It is, for example, postulated that daughters learn to mother and to seek motherhood through their attachment to their mothers (Chodorow, 1978). It is further asserted that with the birth of the first child, a daughter comes to more fully understand the maternal role and to emphasize with the experiences of her mother (Whiting, 1984).

Although a review of the psychological literature suggests that there can be some very real conflicts and problems between mothers and daughters, especially during adolescence and young adulthood (Baruch, Barnett & Rivers, 1983), their developmental tasks are similar. As daughters move toward adulthood, mothers and daughters struggle with issues of separation, loss and autonomy, which are often seemingly characterized by anxiety. Adolescence has been described as the most difficult stage of parenthood (Pasley & Gecas, 1984), the adolescent period tends to be associated with high levels of stress for family members (Field & Widmayer, 1982); as well as increased marital discord (Gove & Peterson, 1980; Nickerson, 1979). Recognizing the psychological reorganization that mothering an adolescent daughter implies, it is reasonable to suggest that increased psychiatric symptomology of middle-aged women, especially among single mothers is related to their maternal crises (Baruch, 1984, et.al.).

Adolescence thus is traditionally marked by strife as the parent and adolescent struggle over issues of autonomy, control and independence. However, in the case of the mother and her adolescent

daughter, the conflict doesn't necessarily result in either an completely autonomous adult or permanent alienation - although autonomy need not and usually is not accompanied by alienation. And it is important to recognize that conflict is not inevitable, nor if it occurs does it last forever. At any rate, most daughters end up being adult versions of their mothers regardless of the amount of adolescent rebellion. From the evidence we will cite next, they also grow up to like their mothers, as well as to be like their mothers - a state of affairs not generally recognized or acknowledged in our society.

The Adult Years. Little has been previously empirically known about the mother-daughter relationship during the long span of years when the daughter is a mature adult and her mother typically is neither frail nor dependent. Despite recent negative attention in the popular literature (Friday, 1977), the adult role of "daughter" has had only limited conceptual or empirical attention from social scientists. Several strands of theorizing and research (Baruch & Barnett, 1981; Cohler & Grunebaum, 1980; and Low, 1980) do however, provide evidence for the salience of this relationship throughout the life span.

The image of the mother-daughter relationship as normatively and permanently a conflicted, anxiety-producing one (Friday, 1977) is contradicted by the findings of Baruch and Barnett, 1981; Baruch, Barnett and Rivers, 1983; and Cohler and Grunebaum, 1980. Typically, the relationship of the mother, and the role of adult daughter, provide emotional gratification important to psychological well-being, the more so to the extent that a woman lacks other social roles and/or imtimate relationships. During the period when a young daughter is

struggling for autonomy and a sense of identity, or during the time when an older mother is in poor health, distress associated with the relationship may overshadow the rewards. Only for a minority of women, however, do these difficulties appear to be long-standing and intractable.

Niemala (1980, 1982) stresses that women's life transitions coincide with changes in motherhood status (e.g., becoming a mother, leaving her children to go out to work, her children eventually leaving home, etc.) and points to the resulting need for women to work through their feelings about these motherhood transitions and to prepare themselves for their next life stage. She speaks about the need for mothers to work through ambivalent feelings (1980, pp. 100, 102) and to participate in group discussions which encourages mothers to work out these normal feelings and their role conflicts (1982, p. 161).

The Elderly. Studies of intergenerational relations have tended to focus on daughters and mothers as the central figures, since daughters have been the traditional kin-keepers, and the majority of dependent elderly parents are widowed mothers. Within social gerontology, the daughter's relationship to her aging mother has been studied from the perspective of the maintenance of morale among the elderly and the provision of care for dependent parents (Adams, 1968; Lopata, 1979; Troll, Miller & Atchley, 1979). And, in general, the importance of the adult daughter to the welfare of her aging parents has been stressed.

Clinical Implications of Adult Mother, Adult Daughter Relationships

The concentration on the extremes of the life span - the daughter in childhood, the mother in old age - has tended to distort our views of

the mother-daughter relationship during the adult years. In contrast to issues of dependency and care, obligation and guilt, the relationship during these years can be viewed as voluntaristic, involving two status equals who are essentially independent of each other (Baruch & Barnett, 1981; Hess & Waring, 1978). Although the potential for stressful, conflicted relationships between mothers and daughters is great, data presented here suggest that these characteristics are neither typical nor inevitable. Rather, the data we have to date from a variety of sources (Baruch & Barnett, 1981; Cohler & Grunebaum, 1980; and Low, 1980, 1984) suggests that the attachment of the adult-daughter to her mother, and vice versa, continues, deepens and matures to a mutually satisfying, supportive, respectful and important one for most adult daughters and their mothers.

And, as Cohler and Grunebaum (1980) note:

> Since a lack of separateness between adult women and their mothers is characteristic of relations between generations in contemporary society, it is necessary to rethink the entire question of this enduring closeness for members of each generation of women (p. 42).

Therapists have, for example, historically attempted to split the daughter from her mother in an effort to aid her to achieve autonomy. Operating from male-derived therapeutic models which stressed separateness as desirable and normal, adult daughters attachments to their mothers have been viewed as childlike and regressive in nature. Such intervention often fails when the attempt to aid the daughter's achievement of selfhood <u>disregards</u> the wish on the daughter's part to maintain a relationship with her mother in some meaningful way. It does not necessarily help a daughter to feel better about herself if she is left to feel worse about her mother. Low (1980) stresses that work with mothers and daughters must include

an awareness of the normative aspects of the attachment of the daughter to her mother through adulthood. This attachment contains within it the desire to protect and respond to the mother and to maintain this connection with her as a significant person in her life. Baruch & Barnett (1981) based on their research, stress that only a minority of adult mothers and adult daughters report unsatisfying relationships with each other. Of those few continuing to experience conflict, tne need, Low (1980) asserts, is not for separation, but for acceptance, a coming to terms of mutual respect for their differentness while maintaining and strengthening their relatedness. Just as women have had their consciousness raised to value and respect their need for relatedness to other women, to experience their common sisterhood; there is an equal need to have their consciousness raised to value the continuing and enduring need for relatedness of mothers and daughters. For mothers and daughters tend to be significant sources of aid and mutual support to each other across the span of their lives.

Summary and Overview

The mother and child relationship typically starts out being a close one with the child being very dependent for its existence on the mother. The mother and daughter relationship continues to be a close one with daughters tending to identify with their mothers regardless of the conflictural vicissitudes of adolescence and the nature or reputed virtue of the mothers role-modelling. In adult life, for most daughters, the relationship continues to be a close one with dependency being replaced with mutual aid, respect and support. Most mothers and their grown daughters become good friends in the best sense of that descriptor. It is anticipated that the liberation of women will not

deprive mothers and daughters of this satisfying state of affairs; but rather will increase the probability of mothers furnishing a greater and more effective repertoire of adult role models - hence, further enhancing their daughters' adult development. It is also hoped that mothers and daughters will be encouraged rather than discouraged to continue the bond which arises out of normal developmental need and can emerge to be one of mutual gratification and support.

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